



The Navajo Nation  
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## Navajo President Buu Nygren, Speaker Crystalyne Curley disappointed in removal of RECA amendments from bill

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** — Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren and Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley expressed disappointment Thursday that amendments to benefit former Navajo uranium workers and their families were removed from pending federal legislation.

“On behalf of the Navajo Nation, we express our disappointment in the removal of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act Amendments from the National Defense Authorization Act,” they wrote in a joint statement.

“This decision is disheartening to the Navajo Nation — a people whose significant contributions helped build America's nuclear arsenal, secured a victory in World War II, and boosted energy development,” they said.

The RECA amendments were meant to provide relief for horrific health consequences suffered by former Navajo uranium miners and their families.

“By stripping these amendments from the National Defense Authorization Act, the government sends a deplorable message: that the sacrifices of the Navajo Nation do not matter,” the Navajo leaders wrote. “This is unacceptable.”

President Nygren and Speaker Curley stated that the Navajo people have endured inordinate

suffering, disease and cancers through radiation exposure from mid-to-late 20th century.

Uranium mining began on the Navajo Nation in 1944 to support the federally-led Manhattan Project.

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— Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren,  
Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley

Following World War II, uranium mining on Navajo lands increased through the Atomic Energy Commission because of the Cold War.

In 1990, Congress enacted the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, or RECA. The law provided one-time compensation to uranium workers and downwinders for covered diseases pre-1971.

The current program is limited to those who were exposed during the period of Jan. 1, 1942, to Dec. 31, 1971.

RECA was administered by the Department of Justice and awarded more than \$2.4 billion in benefits to more than 37,000 claimants.

The compensation program is set to expire in June 2024. Expansion of the program is needed to advance justice for additional individuals who were adversely impacted but are not currently eligible for benefits under the existing RECA regulations.

Needed amendments to RECA were introduced in the last several congressional terms, including the current 118th Congress.

The amendments are significant because for the first time they acknowledged the sacrifices by uranium workers, including the Navajo people who worked in the uranium mines.

“We extend our sincere gratitude to Congressman Eli Crane for his unwavering support and to Congresswoman Teresa Leger-Fernandez for her leadership in championing this bill in the House,” President Nygren and Speaker Curley wrote. “We are also immensely thankful to Senators Lujan, Hawley, and Crapo for their advocacy and leadership in the Senate.”

“The Navajo Nation has given much in the interest of national defense,” the two leaders said. “The United States must rectify the ongoing impact of these contributions on our people. We ask for the support of all who hear our call to help us in our fight for justice, for healing, and for the future health of our Nation.”

An estimated 30 million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo land between 1944 and 1986.

Some 524 abandoned uranium mines remain on the Navajo Nation. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, not a single mine has been properly cleaned up.

On July 16, 1979, the largest hazardous waste spill in American history occurred at the Church Rock, N.M., mill site when more than 1,000 tons of radioactive mill waste and 93 million gallons of acidic radioactive tailings solution spilled into the Puerco River.

The contaminated water traveled downstream through the Navajo Nation to the community of Sanders, Ariz.

An untold number of people were exposed to radiation through employment in the uranium industry, weapons testing, and contaminants unwittingly brought into homes.

RECA has provided tiered compensation as restitution for serious illnesses, including certain cancers and kidney disease, suffered by Americans who sacrificed their health for their country.

The Navajo Birth Cohort Study revealed that uranium exposure and exposure to other heavy metals and metalloids had an impact on birth outcomes causing early development delays among Navajo children.

The study found elevated urine concentrations for uranium, manganese, cadmium and lead in pregnant Navajo women.

The grave consequences of this exposure have echoed through generations of Navajos. Those exposures caused serious health problems including various forms of cancer, kidney disease, and birth defects.

“We call on all Americans to join us in urging Congress to rectify the wrongs that have resulted from uranium mining on the Navajo Nation – and indeed other locations as well,” President Nygren and Speaker Curley wrote. “The health impacts of radiation exposure on our people are not issues of the past. They persist in the present and will continue into the future unless they are adequately addressed.

“The Navajo Nation has given much in the interest of national defense,” they said. “The United States must rectify the ongoing impact of these contributions on our people. We ask for the support of all who hear our call to help us in our fight for justice, for healing, and for the future health of our Nation.”

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